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Clothes (Un)Make the (Wo)Man – Ungendering Fashion (2015)?

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Acknowledged by many as the year that the term 'transgender' fully entered American mainstream consciousness, 2015 marked a distinct cultural watershed. Models, media stars and activists were coming out with their transgender identities (Griggs 2015). At the same time, and without coincidence, the world of fashion took up the issue. Transgender models such as Lea T walked the runways, and Andreja Pejic was featured in the May issue of *Vogue.* Designers and brands also openly revealed a new gender consciousness, or even strove beyond gender dichotomy. Kimberly Chrisman-Campbell (2015) crystallized the moment by writing for *The Atlantic*: 'Indeed, unisex everything appears to be back with a vengeance'.

Yet this was not merely the 1960s unisex revisited. The phenomenon encompassed, but also moved beyond, avant-gardist designers and high-fashion brands, and in the United States extended further than the 'fashion center' of New York City (Chrisman-Campbell 2015; Leach 2015). It came to the British high street when in March 2015, Selfridges in London opened its Agender department consisting of three floors (Selfridges 2015; Tsjeng 2015). Zara followed suit exactly one year later (Sharkey 2016). *The New York Times Style Magazine* published fashion spreads on gender-blending menswear, representing androgynous black models (New York Times, 2015). According to *Harper's Bazaar,* among eighteen 'fashion moments' of 2015 were: Caitlyn Jenner appearing on the cover of the July issue of *Vanity Fair,* photographed by Annie Leibovitz; Kanye West's two-gender ambiguous *Yeezy* collections; Rick Owens Spring 2016 collection, featuring models strapped together walking the runway, redolent of performances by Leigh Bowery; but also some distinctly binary-gendered examples. Therefore, we can ask whether in the third millennium, fashion can serve to make and unmake genders, and in what way this making and possible unmaking of genders affects the way sexuality is performed (Bain

2017).

Gender and Sexuality, from Being to Doing

For the less fashion informed or interested, the transformation of former Olympic athlete, and Kardashian father and step-father, Bruce Jenner to Caitlyn Jenner highlighted gender transitioning more widely. Laverne Cox, the trans actress who became a celebrity for her role in the Netflix series *Orange Is the New Black* (2013–) (Carveth 2015) and had been nominated in 2014 for a Primetime Emmy Award as the first openly transgender person, was in 2015 named as one of the 'Pioneers' on *TIME* magazine's list of the '100 most influential people' (http://time.com/collection/2015-time-100/). These examples, among others, identify the mid-2010s as marking a 'paradigm shift' connected to changes in conceptualizing gender, and corporeally living and *doing* gender (Butler 1990; Lloyd 2007; Zimmerman and West 1987) within, but also beyond, American society. This, in turn, was reflected in contemporary fashion. In order to contemplate on and investigate this phenomenon, it is necessary to consider how fashion does, or does not, contribute to the representation, and moreover the *making* of genders, and participate in the production of gender systems. To do so, we ask in this chapter whether what was being highlighted in 2015, in the United States in particular, produced a wider 'ungendering' of fashion, or how much it actually reflected and supported the proliferation and fluidity of gender identification. Was this a sign of a more significant fashion shift, or simply another passing 'fashion moment'?

Gender, both as a concept and as lived reality, has indeed been changing rapidly in the West since the mid-twentieth century. While 'second-wave' feminism struggled for women's rights and against patriarchy in the1960s and 1970s, it did so within a binary gender system, or rather still conceptualized gender through biological sexes. The 'third wave' of feminism was more geared toward a recognition of differences among and within women (Bowden and Mummery 2009), and in pointing out that gender is largely a cultural and social construction, constricted and regulated, but also enabled and produced by discursive practices and corporeal reiterations (Butler 1990). One of the canonical figures of contemporary feminist theory, Judith Butler crystallized this account of gender as performative, thus emphasizing the role of repeated

gendered practices. Intersectional feminism, having its roots in the 1960s and 1970s galvanization of women of color and lesbians (Collins and Bilge 2016), further emphasized the hierarchies between women, constructed by such axes of difference as sexuality, race, class, age, bodily abilities and religious backgrounds, to name a few. Also, the critical studies of sexuality went through a sea change, as queer studies was launched as an academic field in the early 1990s (de Lauretis 1991; White 2007: 1; Hall 2003). Queer studies further complicated the previously assumed simple account of the connection between gender and sexuality, which had normatively naturalized heterosexuality (Sedgwick 2008; Hall 2003). In the 2000s, even the mainstream discourses began to encompass the plurality of genders and sexualities, and brought familiarity to such terms as 'non-binary' or 'nonconforming' gender, as well as cis-gender, and to antinormative sexualities (see, e.g. Kern and Malone 2015; Bennett 2016).

But even though gender pluralism and sexual anti-normativity have gained a momentum, there is strong evidence that indicates that we are *not* living through a process of 'undoing' gender (Butler 2004) and sexuality. On the contrary, gender and sexuality seem to form just as much a battlefield as ever, which makes them highly political issues. The Obama administration in the United States took a stand on discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, and in 2015 entered into the 'bathroom wars', by offering gender-neutral bathrooms in the White House (Marcus 2015). In popular culture, series such as *Orange Is the New Black* and *Transparent* (Amazon 2014–17), brought visibility to transgender characters and actors, and transgender subjectivity at large. All of this, however, has failed to prevent the continuing transgender vulnerability and hate crimes against transgendered people in the United States and elsewhere, especially against trans people of color (Griggs 2015; Transrespect.org 2016; Allen 2017).

These realities lead us to suggest in this chapter that gender is not being undone, but rather that it is changing rapidly, and that fashion has a key role in this change. In this process of re-imagining gender, fashion discourse and fashion design are extending their binary-based vocabulary of gender, to include not only 'unisex', but also neologisms such as 'agender', non-binary and 'ungendered'[1] fashion. We insist, however, that we have to take a closer look at the ways in which fashion (including designers, media, models, consumers, images and actual material

garments) participates in doing gender and making changes to it, may be making it more flexible and plural rather than erasing or undoing it. We also suggest that by looking at different areas of (meaning) production in fashion we may need and find methodologically new ways of addressing and conceptualizing how fashion indeed participates in making gender.

While it is possible to conceptually and theoretically distinguish between gender and sexuality, in practices of everyday life – fashion included – they entangle and influence each other in multiple ways. Heteronormatively thinking, it is supposed that women are 'naturally' feminine and desire (cis) men, who are 'naturally' masculine and desire (cis) women (Butler 1990). This has also for long been a prerequisite for fashion designers, and photographers, who have focused on women's fashion, and on producing garments that have been culturally associated with feminine sexuality and sensuality. Some theorists have even gone as far as stating that theorizing fashion equals theorizing femininity (Tseelon 2001), while others have emphasized that women's ways of wearing clothing can also be interpreted as nonverbal resistance (Crane 2000: 99–132; Holland 2004). Either way, critical and theoretical thinking about fashion's ability to enhance heterosexual appeal has been entwined with feminist theorizing of the 'male gaze' (Mulvey 1989) based on a strictly binary notion of gender. Already changing the 'lens' into a lesbian one affected the conceptual knot between femaleness, femininity and always being the object of the gaze (Lewis and Rolley 1997; Lewis 1997); queering the gaze and the notion of gender performance has further complicated theorizing the routes of desire in corporeal doing, being looked at and looking. It is one of our questions in this chapter, how both the erasure and proliferation of the markings of gender in fashion-affects the politics of sexuality and desire.

Fashion and [Non-]binary Genders

Taking a broad historical and cross-cultural perspective on the subject of gender and dressing, individual and collective clothing choices have not revealed consistent manifestations or expectations of what could or should be worn by women or men. In the West, historically, fashion has tended to reflect and perpetuate a largely dichotomous gender system. Even with women wearing trousers and the introduction of so-called 'unisex' garments, fashion has remained substantially divided down the two gender lines. It is notable also that while more unisex dressing in the 1970s may have made women's clothes slightly more masculine, it never

made them totally unfeminine. Hollander notes how ‘assortments of blouses and sweaters’ were worn with trouser and skirt suits ‘to suggest Dressing for Success, rather than… bodily self-possession’ (1994: 170). At the same time in popular culture, parallel attempts to feminize men’s appearance, or to de-emphasize male masculinity, highlighted by glam rock and its icons, such as Marc Bolan, David Bowie or Roxy Music in the United Kingdom, proved to be particularized and short-lived in mass fashion (Chrisman-Campbell 2015; Paoletti 2015). US musicians including Iggy Pop and The New York Dolls had an even more select following.

Yet by the 1980s fashion was registering significant change and offering greater flexibility for dressing beyond the strictly demarcated gender binaries. While ‘power dressing’ continued to impact corporate culture in the United States and beyond, the growing presence of women in previously male-dominated professions had meant that ‘work dress began to evolve away from the very tailored and conservative look’ (Steele, in Kidwell and Steele 1989: 88). However, innovation toward less gender-defined fashion did not originate in the United States in the 1980s. Among the most significant fashion innovators in the latter part of the twentieth century were designers of Japanese origin, who introduced a much less gender-defined way of dressing in the 1980s, which caused a ‘revolution’ in Paris (Kawamura 2004) and proved a distinct fashion counterpoint to power dressing. Kenzo, Kansai Yamamoto and more particularly the designs of Issey Miyake, Yohji Yamamoto and Rei Kawakubo of Comme des Garçons introduced garments that took their origins from the looser, less body-defining clothing particular to eastern sartorial traditions, rather than more fitted and tailored western dress. Also, in the mid-1990s, in the popular domain and originating in Europe, the British football star David Beckham was the most iconic example of the newly-defined ‘metrosexual’. Referenced as a product of urban heterosexual masculinity, akin to the eighteenth-century dandy, the metrosexual was more concerned with fashion and appearance than in any time since the ‘great masculine renunciation’ of the nineteenth century (Geczy and Karaminas 2013: 49–98; Flügel 1930).

Aforementioned developments are not without significance for this chapter, which continues to argue that avant-garde fashion’s relationship with gender took some basic points of departure after the 1980s. One, premised by the work of the Japanese designers and their successors the ‘Antwerp 6’ and designer Martin Margiela, was more conceptual and even ‘intellectual’,

predicated on looser, softer garments, often featuring black, navy blue and more neutral colors. The other, kept true to more gender-defined styles, but featured greater opportunities for both women and men to wear styles, fabrics and colors typically associated with the so-called 'opposite' gender**.** It is these distinctions that we discuss in the next section.

Alternative Femininities and Masculinities

Pogensky, model and contributor; and Anita Dolce Vita (moderator), fashion and culture blogger, *dapper Q*.